The Fishergirl and Education

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The Parable of the Fishergirl in Understanding Education

I climbed a high mountain by the sea and stood among the ibex—those sky-bound creatures who flee from men by climbing ever higher. There, I spoke to Athena and said: *“Once, you were a soul within another; then you were born, and now you live within me.”*

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Preface

This is a parable that engages with many philosophical questions concerning the nature of education. It proposes a concise definition and introduces the original concept of the “point of contact,” or archesyndesmos.

“Education is the transfer of being to the psyche”

The Land and the Fishergirl

In the town of Malao, by the Eden Sea, there lived a fisherman named Orah and his daughter, Lūl. The autumn winds had begun to blow, carrying the scent of drying frankincense from the groves and pushing trading ships toward the harbour. Father and daughter were of the native people and made their living from the sea, catching fish and gathering pearls to sell in the marketplace. They took great care that only the finest of their catch reached those who would carry it across the old waters, for they believed that what was taken from the sea must be worthy of its depths.

Lūl was a girl of quiet thought, small in stature but keen of mind. Her skin was the colour of myrrh; her hair spiralled and was touched with red, while her small eyes held wide, black pupils. She wore a light green tunic edged with white, unlike the plain garments of the others—a mark of her difference. Her mother, a woman of Sabea, had perished a year before when her ship sank on the journey to Mariaba. Now Lūl followed the ways of her father's faith, Wāqiyo, and divided her days between toil and study.

In the morning, she helped her father the fisherman. She mended nets, cleaned fish, and carried their goods to market. There, she counted coins and spoke the tongue of the traders, Greek, for she dreamed that one day she might sail beyond Malao as a merchant herself. When the sun stood at an angle, she went to the wadād's school, a frond-walled shelter near the cliffs, where children sat on the ground and wrote upon wooden tablets with charcoal ink. Between two young sycamores at the gate, they were taught the divine laws, the ethics of men, and the words to name the world.

But it was in the quiet hours before dawn, when the land was cast in amber light, that Lūl sought her truest lessons. She would sit by the shore, where the fishermen had long departed and only the faint shadows of ships remained. There, she would blow upon a shell that drew creatures of the sea—turtles and birds—listening to the melodies that bridge the worlds of the physical and the ideal, in the place where everything began. And in their presence, she pondered the nature of life, the customs of men, and the rules that bind them.

The Father and the Teacher's Lessons

One day, Lūl brought with her a pot of hohob wine. When they reached the shore, she offered it to her father. He sat upon a great rock, poured the drink into a small cup, and spoke as Lūl rested upon the root of a tree.

"Today," he began, "I shall teach you of fishing. To fish is to labour with certainty, for the sea yields to those who labour. The lazy despise the net, but the wise know its hardness is not cruelty—only the effort required. This is the contentment of the fisherman."

Lūl then asked: "You have taught me of fishing. Now teach me of education."

Her father replied: "It is a moral tool that men use to live well in the world."

"But the trader teaches his wife to deceive," she said.

"If deception profits them, then to them it is good," he answered.

Under a tree to the right, the wadād taught his pupils in the afternoon, and his lesson, too, turned to the nature of education.

"To seek knowledge," he said, "is to glimpse the greatness of Wāq. We know Him by the boundless sea and the tall mountains."

A student asked: "But what is knowledge, and how is it sought?"

The wadād answered: "To seek knowledge is what you do now—learning. Knowledge is the end of it; and the seeking is education. See how language binds them: the two are one."

Another asked: "Then what is teaching?"

The wadād said: "Teaching is the guide for learning. The latter, as I have said, is the essence. Perhaps together they form a greater truth of which we are not yet aware."

And so the lessons ended: one spoke of its use, the other of its nature.

Coming to Know

At dawn, Lūl went to meditate upon three questions: What is education? Is it for humans alone? Is it always good? For three days, she sat in contemplation, but her mind offered only echoes of what she had been taught. On the third day, she resolved to abandon her inquiry.

As she walked back through the frankincense groves, she saw sandgrouse flying from the west. The day before, they had come from the north, and the day before that, from the east. These birds journeyed far, though the sea lay before them—yet they would not carry its waters. For the sandgrouse drinks only fresh water, never salt, and in its endless search, it adapts but does not relent, and from this relentless adaptation springs their seric joys. Seeing this, Lūl understood: she must not forsake persistence for the sake of what is readily given. And so she returned to her meditation, resolving to continue for thirty days more.

On the thirty-first day, as she perched upon a tree, the sea's tide grew fierce. A turtle emerged, thrashing, unable to swim against the current or through it. For a time, it struggled—until it beheld a sewn-ship, moving in perfect balance upon the waves. The turtle ceased its thrashing and observed; then, through understanding, it imitated the ship and found its harmony. Once steadied, it slipped back into the depths and swam away.

In this, Lūl saw the truth: all creatures learn, not only men. Yet man alone learns more. She knew the ship, its making, its artifice—yet the turtle, though simple, had learned balance. And so she understood what education is. The ship, the turtle, and the lesson were its three parts: embodying the teaching, the learning, and the knowledge. Without the three, there is no education. The ship offered knowledge; the turtle received the form. Between them lay the archesyndesmos, the point of contact where the two meet, and from which knowledge flows. It is the point where mere perception transcends into understanding. And as all perception leads to different levels of understanding, this point occurs across a spectrum. The turtle first reached a point of contact when it understood, This is a ship; then a middle stage when it realized, It moves with the tide; and a later one when it grasped how the ship kept its balance.

She learned that not only men teach—all things teach, living and lifeless, but only the living learn.

On the morning of the following day, she turned her contemplation to the third question: whether education is inherently good. Yet before this, she perceived that she must first discern the nature of education itself—whether it is a thing that stands alone or exists only in the act. For this would illuminate the greater truth.

Thus, she considered the three aspects: the Being, the Transmission, and the Receiving. And she saw that education is the union of the latter two, which act upon the first. And she understood this: even if the living being does not know a thing, the thing yet abides in its own nature, unchanged. Therefore, education is not the thing itself—it is the way a living being comes to know it. Education is not an entity, like a pearl, but a happening.

And so she saw that education comes about when a living mind turns toward that which transmits knowledge, and in this turning, knowing is brought forth.

She also saw that Receiving—which men call learning—holds the highest place, yet it is not education alone. Education is the coming together of all three. But though all are needed, education itself is about the living being coming to know. Thus, it is the meeting between the living and the world that is.

Then came an additional knowing: that education has an aim by its very nature. For it is not merely that education leads to knowing—rather, it is in its very essence about a mind coming to know something. And so Lūl understood that education is the living turning toward the world, and in that turning, the world is revealed.

Like the clear chime of a coin dropping into a fountain—one, then another, and another—each new insight sounded its note, layering into a rhythm that rose without interruption: a constant signal of awareness deepening.

The Reasoning of Man

On the following day, as the sun reached its zenith, Lūl returned to the third question. She perceived that living beings engage with education in two ways: they bring it into existence, and they shape it. Yet for education to be, it need only exist through the knowing of a thing—not in how it is later formed. Thus, she saw that education itself is neither good nor bad, but neutral, a mere recognition of what is. It is the rational mind of beings that shapes it afterwards, bending it toward goodness, and so it is called good. Yet even in this shaping, men may still teach or learn what is bad. And this shaping is not the work of one mind alone, but of many, moving together in accordance with what is correct.

To illustrate this, let us consider, from Lūl's lessons and observations, the trader and his child, and the way of the marketplace.

The Trader's Lesson

A merchant took his son aside and taught him to count coins with care. The counting itself was neither just nor unjust—it could serve right or wrong alike. But the father said: "If you cheat, you gain once. If you act justly, you will eat all your days." And so the son was taught by reason, not by virtue.

The Way of the Market

In the square where men trade, the cheat is soon known. His customers leave him. But the honest man is sought again and again, for his word is sure. In time, the market drives out deceit, not by decree, but by the slow turning of many minds toward what endures.

And so, the common idea of education emanates from the shaping influence of rationality, combined with the belief that education consists solely of learning. In reality, its true nature differs.

The Dwelling of Knowledge

The next day, when the sun stood at a sharp angle, Lūl sat within the school and traced her thoughts upon a wood. In the Sabean tongue, she wrote and thus she spoke:

“Education begins in the heart of the teacher and ends in the heart of the student. By nature, education is neither good nor bad; but the reasoning of men and their laws make it good.”

And within her, then, dwelled the understanding that knowledge is one, like the wide world, yet each person inhabits only a part of it. It is like the sphere shaped tents of the nomads pitched south of town: what one knows is one’s own ground and sky—a smaller world within the whole. A large tent may hold much, a small tent little. Yet the measure of knowledge does not mean the greater contains all that the lesser knows, for each may hold a truth unique to itself—just as no two strands of hay in a woven mat are ever the same.

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